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Welcome to today's interview. I'm delighted to be joined by Dr. Jigisha Patel.

Jigisha is an independent research consultant and the founder of Jigisha Patel Research Integrity Limited. She comes from a background having been a doctor and worked previously at Biomed Central, setting up one of the first research integrity teams. So Jigisha is here today to talk to us all about her work and experience within the research integrity field.

Welcome, Jigisha. Thank you very much. I'm very happy to be here.

I should also quickly introduce myself. My name is Mary Miskin. I am the operations Director for Enago Charlesworth and also a member of the Board of Directors for the International Society of Managing and Technical Editors.

And I guess there's a number of bodies that are kind of looking into this. There's things like United to Act, there's the STM Integrity Hub and working groups, there's Committee on Publishing Ethics. How do you see these stakeholders coming together to put in place regulation and everybody working to agreed standards? So just to apply that.

So COPE is not regulatory? It's often thought of as regulatory, but COPE began when a group of editors who were seeing similar problems just got together and asked each other how they would deal with them. Yeah, it was more of a support group for editors in the early days and it's now grown into this big organization. So what COPE will do is COPE is advise editors and publishers on how to adhere to best practice, but it's for the community to decide what that best practice should be.

So for example, COPE didn't decide what medical research, what standards medical research should follow. COPE didn't decide on ethics committees and consent. All of that happened within the research community.

But COPE now will help editors adhere to those standards. So COPE is limited because of that. So it's not a regulatory body, but it can help drive efforts to collaborate to agree on standards.

And I think United to Act is the first step because United2 Act is a response to the industry wide threat that paper mills are posing. And United to Act is bringing together all the stakeholders involved, institutions, researchers, librarians, publishers, editors, everyone together to say, hey, we need to be doing something here. And part of it is raising awareness, part of it is increasing communication between stakeholders, increasing understanding between stakeholders.

And then I think the next step would be now let's agree some standards. So the process I think is just beginning now and beginning to gain momentum. But it's a good first step and it's a very necessary first step and STM is involved in that as well.

And we've got representatives from big organisations in the industry involved, which they need to be. Yes. And obviously that touches on the problems caused by paper mills and the need for the standards and agreements within the industry.

And thinking specifically about paper mills, I can remember personally first hearing the term paper mill, probably when I was entry level into Publishing over 15 years ago, wondering what on earth a paper mill was in relation to research integrity. But now they're kind of hitting the headlines globally. There's reports in the general media about mass retractions.

So although it seems to be an alarming new phenomenon, we know they've been around for quite a long time. But what do you think has contributed to the seemingly phenomenal growth of paper mills in recent years? And do you think that threat is likely to continue to increase? Certainly is the research culture and what is rewarded so globally for researchers, they need publications in order to get their grants, in order to get job promotions and prestigious jobs. So that is certainly the driving force.

That's the demand that the paper mills are exploiting. And because there's been a growth of research, there's been a growth of researchers, there's been a growth of journals, the whole process has increased because of all of that. And the way to tackle paper mills is to take away that demand from researchers because it's huge money as well.

For the commercial paper mills, who exist purely to run a paper mill must be making huge amounts of money. So they're not just going to go away. We as an industry need to take away that demand, support for what they're selling to the researchers.

And the way to do that is to reward the good behaviors because we're rewarding the bad behaviors. You know, people get their list of publications and they get their grants and they don't care. There's no consequences for them because they can take part in a paper mill.

They'll pay to get authorship on a paper. They've got that on their CV and they can go off and then use it to get their grant or their job. The, you know, publisher will recognize this is a paper mill, paper will retract it, but it's too late.

It served its purpose for the author. The author doesn't care whether it's retracted or not now because, you know, they've used it on their cv. It's no big deal to anyone.

Nobody's suffering and so this is helping to perpetuate it. There's no consequence, there are no consequences for anyone. So two things to do are to reward better behavior.

So don't reward A lot of publications reward high quality research. You know, don't reward publishing in a journal with a high impact factor. Reward publishing in journals that support open science, that support collaboration and sharing and valid, you know, validation, all of that.

And if that happens, then it's not, you know, just getting your name on a paper is not going to be good enough. Authors will have to change their behaviour, which will take away the demand from paper mills. And then also I do think there needs to be consequences for authors who do take part in paper mills because it's, it's fraud.

That's what it is, the bottom line. So if you're found to be, and nothing happens, even if we, you know, tell institutions that these authors were, you know, their papers were all part of your paper mills, institutions are not doing anything because they're worried as well about the impact on their reputation. So they have this incentive to keep it all quiet too.

So then just needs to be an acknowledgement this is happening. It's bad, it's bad for everyone. Let's change the incentives and let's actually establish some proper sanctions for authors who take part in it in the first place and then help remove that amazing, amazing demand there is for papers.

And do you think to achieve that there needs to be more dialogue between publishers and research institutions? How, how would you go about achieving that? I mean, I think that that's, that's definitely the case. I mean the phenomenon is a global phenomenon and that's a very huge challenge because why would, you know, I mean, here in the uk, why would anyone listen to a UK institution or a UK based publisher on a global, global level? So we actually have to bring in stakeholders from across the world, from the Institute, from institutions to, to, to help say this is wrong. We need to be doing more as institutions and again, COPE is beginning to COPE is sort of inviting collaboration with institutions and membership from institutions to help build those bridges.

Because we're running in parallel at the moment, you know, publishers and because they're commercial, a lot of them are commercial organizations and institutions which are academic, they run in parallel, they don't talk to each other enough and they need to sort of understand each other better, talk to each other in order to work together against Baker Mills. I'm thinking more recently there have been some high profile mass retractions. For example, the recent Wiley Hindawi case and Wiley released their accompanying white paper which called on other publishers to conduct the kind of thorough analysis they have on their published content.

And some probably feel that other publishers aren't going as far as Wiley did do to identify and correct problems within their published record, do you think there is a reluctance for publishers to take accountability, particularly for historical issues? Yes, I think the beaker publishers have taken accountability and are doing things because they're the ones who've been hardest hit. Because one of the, one of the vulnerabilities that paper mills target is, is the size of a journal or because the more submissions there are, the more, the more editors there are, the easier it is to get by without being noticed. So that's why it's the big publishers that have been affected.

And when I first know I first managed a case of paper mills over 10 years ago and at that time it was very new and it was quite a frightening thing to be to sort of stick your head out and say, oh, we've been affected by a paper mill because you didn't really get a feel for how bad it was for other publishers and you didn't want to be the only one affected by a paper mill because that would reflect badly on your own reputation. And so I think, oh, in the early days that was the case that publishers didn't want to be the ones admitting that they had been affected because they thought, oh, this is a one off, this isn't an industry wide thing and we'd be seen as having poor processes if we, if we, you know, are open about what's happening within our own systems. That's getting better because now everyone has been affected.

Like all the big publishers have been evicted. So it's an industry wide problem. We all get it, it's okay to admit it.

And I think the big publishers have recognized that it's okay to admit you've been affected by a paper mill and actually not only okay to admit it, but to show that you're willing to do something about it and show that you're willing to act and retract. That's become a lot better because it's just become more, more known to be more widespread. I think for smaller publishers it might still be an issue if they've never been affected before.

If they don't have much experience of research integrity issues anyway, they don't retract much for them. It's all very new for them. It might be a bit more of a challenge to sort of say, yes, let's go looking for problems in our journals.

But I think again, even small publishers are facing up to the possibility that they might be affected. Even if they haven't found something, they might be wondering, have we been affected. Should we have a look? And so I do think there's more interest in doing journal audits, you know, publisher audits, to go and have a look and see not, not necessarily whether they've published anything, but whether there are weaknesses or vulnerabilities in their own systems that could make them targets for paper mills so that they can fix all of that.

So generally in answer to. So generally in answer to the question, I think, yes, publishers were reluctant, but it's getting better. And then of course, you have to also bear in mind the huge resource implications behind dealing with these.

It's not easy. You need so much time, you need people and resources to make mass retractions happen. And that is a limiting factor as well.

They have to be choosy about where they're going to spend the time and money fixing their paper mill problems. So, thinking about fixing the problems with research Integrity, you founded Jigisha Patel Research Integrity Limited in 2022. What was it that inspired you to kind of set out on your own and set up that company to support the research integrity environment? I think because I had had such a unique experience and sort of somehow by accident become this expert in research integrity.

And it was quite rare at the time for publishers to have dedicated experts within their organization. So we were the first team. But I felt very strongly that the things I was learning and seeing and experiencing were really important to the whole industry.

Research integrity is everybody's problem. It shouldn't be used as a sort of usp. It shouldn't be touted as, oh, we are better than you at research integrity.

That to me sounded like very wrong. So I wanted to be able to share my experience more widely. And, you know, the more you see, the easier it is.

And for a journal or a publisher who don't see many research integrity problems, it can be very difficult and daunting to deal with them. And I thought, well, I can do this, you know, with my eyes closed, because this is my job. I can help other publishers.

And I was working, you know, for big publishers who already had the resources and had the teams and had the expertise. I thought, I want to go out there and share this expertise more widely to help others do, you know, help others deal with research integrity. It shouldn't be.

The knowledge should be shared. It shouldn't be used, you know, as I said, as a usp, to make one publisher better than another. We should all be at the same standard.

And what is the, the range of services your company now provides? Is it solely to publishers or Is it across the spectrum of the research environment, scholarly research environment? Yeah, it's across the spectrum because I think there's, there are different sort of demands and needs across the publishing industry. I work a lot with publishers and there's a lot of it is related to paper mills and dealing with research integrity issues. But I have done training for universities on peer review on research integrity and I've done training as well for editors on how to, you know, how to tackle research integrity issues in their journals as well.

So it is across the board. But the demand is so great for the whole paper mill work. That is what's taking up everybody's time and effort at the moment.

And it's sort of frustrating because you think, oh, we need time, we need time from firefighting in order to spend time on preventative things. But everybody's busy firefighting. But I do enjoy the training.

I enjoy the webinars and the training that I do because that sort of help, you know, helping the next generation of researchers, the next generation of research integrity specialists, laying foundations for them and sharing what I learned when I first started out as an editor. That's good fun to do. And what are the values that you believe people need to uphold within research integrity? Yeah, I sort of get, I get what you mean in terms of.

I mean, it is a mindset and we need to go back to first principles like why do people go into science? People go into science because they want to find out the truth about how the world works. They want to find knowledge that's going to be useful to society and to the world and to the planet. And it's these sort of really core values of why are we doing what we're doing in the first place that seem to get lost and overtaken by values that are around self promotion.

And as I was saying before that the motivation behind paper mills, the customers of paper mills want promotions and want prestigious jobs and want grants and they need publications for that. And that whole culture is completely wrong and is undermining the basic principles of why we're doing science in, in the first place. So there needs to be a shift in, in thinking.

And I think anyone who wants to go through their research career with research integrity in mind needs to bear those basic principles. Why do you, why are you doing the research? You know, it's for the greater good, it's for the good of society and the planet and keep really basic concepts in mind like being honest, being transparent, having respect and care for, you know, when you're doing research, having respect and care for what you're doing the research on, be it, you know, work in the field, you know, in, with, with populations, being the using plants, being working with animals, being working with humans, you know, respecting what you have, not causing harm. All of these sort of really, really.

I mean, to me it seems like this isn't complicated, is it? I mean, this is sort of how you have to be a good person and try and keep those values always in mind when you are tempted to perhaps cut corners or you're tempted to do something that will help you personally. And this is a very difficult thing because I, I sort of talk about the motivation being, oh, personal gain. But I recognize that also the way the system is set up at the moment, researchers need to get publications for their livelihoods because without the publications they don't get the grants, they don't get the jobs and they don't pay the bills.

So it's all set up against maintaining research integrity. And trying to go through that process while you are faced with these pressures is very difficult for junior researchers, it is, I think, for senior people. They can help advocate and they could be.

The more powerful you are, the more senior you are, the more powerful you are, the more you can advocate for these values. The basic, reminding people of the basic values of why we're doing research in the first place. It sounds very idealistic.

I know it's not very practical, I guess, kind of bringing that together. For the last question, we've talked about the values and the ideal future. We've talked about the firefighting against paper mills.

And at the moment there's so much focus on problems with research integrity and trying to tackle generative AI and all of the new things that are being thrown at publishers that they're having to try to overcome to ensure that what is being published is sound and accurate and genuine. So it, I guess in a way it feels that kind of we're at a point of catastrophizing around research integrity and how do we tackle it and what can we do to overcome it. Thinking ahead to the future, where do you see the industry moving to? You know, are we potentially at the top of the peak? Is there still more to come? Are we going to arrive at a point where this isn't the scale of a problem it's seen as being now? I think, yes, I, I, it is a curve.

I think we're still on the slope going up, but I think we're close to the plateau because everybody's eyes are open now. Previously, people were either were unaware of the issues or were pretending to not be aware because it was too scary to think about them. But I think people's eyes are opening, they're realizing there's a problem and actions are being taken.

You know, the wheels are turning to try and address all these issues. And I think we're still sort of climbing up this hill, but the top is nearly there. And we will plateau and there will be changes in behaviour, changes in the way research culture works, changes in regulation and how misconduct is punished.

All of those factors will come together. So I am optimistic that it will all be sorted out. And I think what we're seeing is the same pattern that we see again and again with new innovations.

We're just seeing it on a huge scale. So, you know, whenever there's a new innovation, there's excitement about it and then unintended consequences become apparent and then everyone thinks, oh, gosh, oh, we need to control this. And then in come the regulations and sometimes there's blows as well.

To. To bring it back under control and rein it in. And that's what's happening with paper mills, I think, and the use of generative AI as well, is that we're at that stage where everyone is thinking, oh, gosh, unintended consequences, panic, but action as well.

To rein it all in. So that I think it'll take a while, but I do think we will plateau and get. Get better.

Thank you, Jigisha. And on that note, we are out of time, so I want to just say thank you very much for sharing your knowledge and expertise and giving us the time today to talk. Been really informative for me and I hope all of our listeners learn a lot from our discussion as well.

So thank you. An absolute pleasure. Thank you so much for inviting me to do this interview.

You're welcome.